

Wellness Notes

Shingles*

Part I

What Is Shingles? Shingles is a disease that affects nerves and results in pain and blisters in adults. It is caused by the same varicella-zoster virus that causes chickenpox. After you recover from chickenpox, the virus does not leave your body, but continues to live in some nerve cells. For reasons that aren't totally understood, the virus can become active instead of remaining inactive. When it's activated, it produces shingles. Just like chickenpox, people with shingles will feel sick and have a rash on their body or face. The major difference is that chickenpox is a childhood illness, while shingles targets older people. Most adults live with the virus in their body and never get shingles. But about one in five people who have had chickenpox will get shingles later in life—usually after the age of 50. When the activated virus travels along the path of a nerve to the surface of the skin, a rash will appear. It usually shows up as a band on one side of the face or body. The word “shingles” comes from the Latin word for belt or girdle because often the rash is shaped like a belt.

Who Is at Risk? Anyone with the varicella-zoster virus in their body can be at risk for getting shingles. Right now there is no way of knowing who will get the disease. But, there are things that make you more likely to get shingles.

Advanced age: The risk of getting shingles increases as you age. People have a hard time fighting off infections as they get older. The chance of getting shingles becomes much higher by age 70.

Trouble fighting infections: Your immune system is the part of your body that fights off infections. Age can affect your immune system. So can an HIV infection, cancer, cancer drugs, radiation treatments, or organ transplant. Even stress or a cold can weaken your immune system for a short time and put you at risk for shingles.

What Are the Symptoms of Shingles? Most people have some of the following symptoms.

- Burning, tingling, or numbness of the skin
- Feeling sick—chills, fever, upset stomach, or headache
- Fluid-filled blisters
- Skin that is sensitive to touch
- Mild itching to strong pain

Shingles follows a pattern. A few days after the tingling or burning feeling on the skin, a red rash will come out on your body, face, or neck. In a few days, the rash will turn into fluid-filled blisters. The blisters dry up and crust over within several days. The rash usually happens on one side of the body. Most cases of shingles last from 3 to 5 weeks.

